Letters

THE "DISMAL SCIENCE" REVISITED

To the Editor:

The January 1989 issue of *Library Quarterly* contains an article which I commend to you, George Harris' essay, "Historic Cataloging Costs, Issues, and Trends." In his piece Harris, senior cataloger, humanities cataloging team, University of Missouri, Columbia, reports the findings that grew out of his efforts to gather data about changes in the length and complexity of LC cataloging copy between 1956 and 1981, changes in academic library cataloging costs over the past century or so, changes in average academic library salaries since the late nineteenth century, and the average cost among reporting academic libraries to catalog a monograph at the time he gathered his data.

Harris' findings are interesting, and I wish to call your attention in particular to his discoveries concerning changes in LC cataloging copy between 1956 and 1981: the length of LC cataloging copy, in number of characters, increased 24.5 percent; the number of entries grew 130.2 percent; the number of fields essentially doubled; and the number of subject heading subdivisions increased 156.2 percent.

Harris concludes that "cataloging copy has definitely become both much longer and much more complex," which he attributes to the growth in collections, with "many more books in libraries to differentiate," and to the increased voluminousness and complexity of library material.

Harris' findings concerning the significant increase in cataloging copy should remind the librarian—especially the librarian making decisions about the allocation of scarce resources—of the need to bear in mind one of the most pervasive and powerful laws of what Carlyle referred to as the "Dismal Science" (i.e., economics): the law of diminishing marginal returns.

Put simply, the law holds that, in the case of whatever process we are interested in, as the amount of some *input* is increased, beyond some point the amount or size of the resulting additions to the *output* will decrease. Concerning application of the law of diminishing marginal returns to the creation of cataloging copy, the relevant input is cataloging staff time; the output we should be concerned with is *not* mere cataloging copy, which is after all a means and not an end in itself, but rather with that end, that is, with useful and sought access points.

The law lends itself to graphic depiction in the well-known (to economists) toppling-over S-curve (figure 1). Let us see what the graph would like if the law of diminishing marginal returns does in fact apply to the creation of cataloging copy. The input we are considering, cataloging staff time, is measured along the horizontal axis, and the output, useful and sought access points, along the vertical. The graph shows what happens to increases in useful and sought access points as we increase the amount of staff time devoted to cataloging. In the graph, the distance from A to B is the same as that from C to D; but notice that the distance from W to X, the increase in useful and sought access points which results when cataloging staff time is increased from A to B, is significantly greater than the distance from Y to Z, the increase in useful and sought access points due to the addition of staff time from C to D. In other words, the increase in cataloging staff time represented by C to D

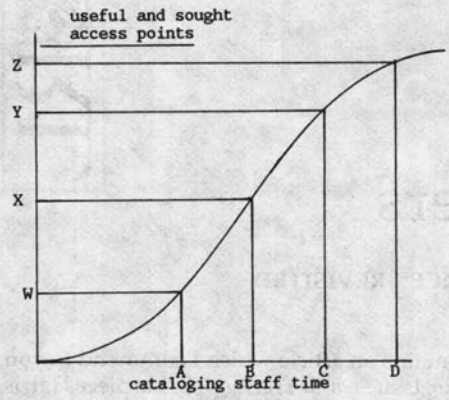

FIGURE 1

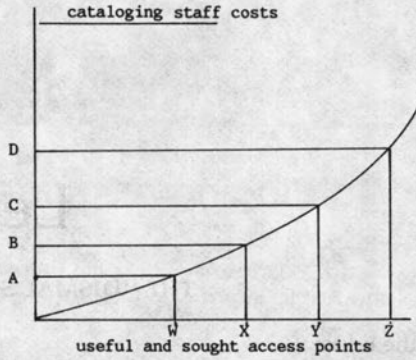

FIGURE 2

resulted in a significantly smaller increase in useful and sought access points than did the increase in staff time from A to B.

It is possible to express the relationship between increases in cataloging staff time and the resulting increases in useful and sought access points in an alternative manner, which may make the relationship even more graphic. In the second graph (figure 2), the vertical axis depicts the *costs* of cataloging staff (i.e., salary and benefits, which are of course a function of cataloging staff time), while the horizontal axis depicts useful and sought access points. The distances from W to X and from Y to Z are the same, indicating equal increases in useful and sought access points. However, the costs to achieve the increases are substantially different. Note that the cost C to D, to achieve increases Y to Z, is significantly greater than cost A to B, required to increase useful and sought access points from W to X.

Perhaps a good way to express the implications of the law of diminishing marginal returns is this: Beyond a certain point, further increases in output become *very* expensive. The trick, then, is to strike a sensible balance between increases in input and the ever more costly increases in output.

We are, of course and unfortunately, unable to refine this analysis as it applies to cataloging copy and useful and sought access points to anything like the degree possible in many processes. About the best we can hope for in the case of the creation of cataloging copy is that the librarian responsible for making decisions pertaining to this process be acutely aware of the law of diminishing marginal returns.

DENNIS P. CARRIGAN
Assistant Dean, College of Library and Information Science
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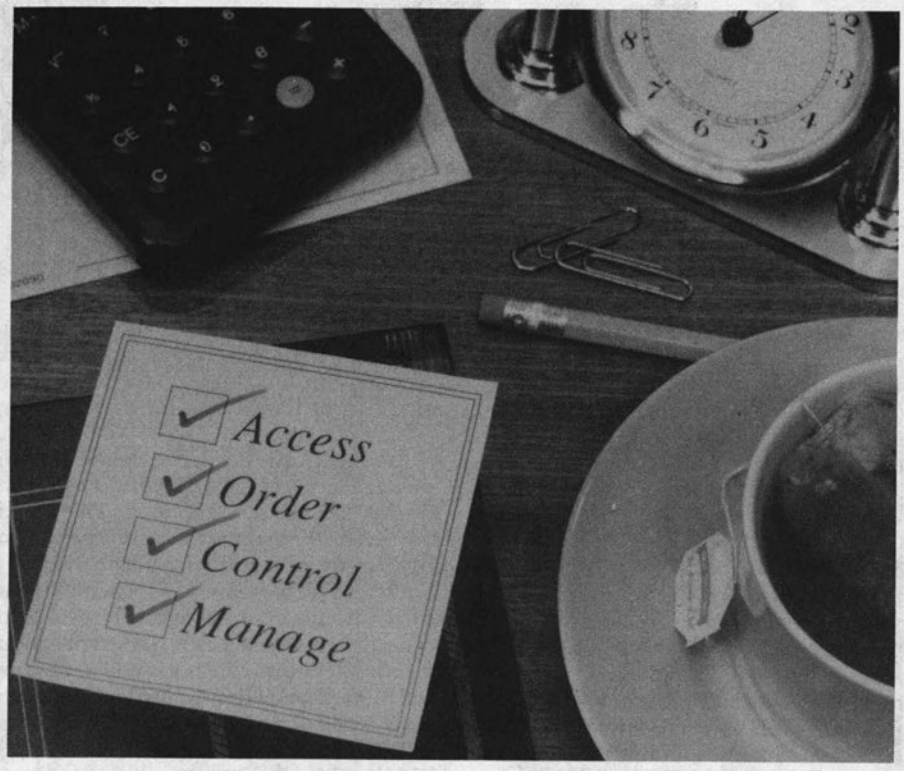

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